

[Burlington Free Press staff report](#)

The 1,500 Vermont Army National Guard soldiers training at a military base in Indiana ahead of a deployment to Afghanistan are excited about their mission and in good spirits as they undergo long, intense days in the field, the state's congressional delegation and Guard leaders reported Monday.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt.; Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt.; and Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., visited the troops Monday at Camp Atterbury, a teeming base south of Indianapolis. Joining them were Guard commanders including Maj. Gen. Michael Dubie, Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Dattilio and Army Chief of Staff Col. Terry Lambert.

"Morale is high," Welch said after he returned to Washington following a day with the 86th Brigade Combat Team. "They're all upbeat. This is hard work, the training. It's constant work, constant exposure to whatever the weather is, and none of them complain. What I see is, they're eager to get on with the job. They're ready to go."

The training consists of entering buildings as a team and clearing them of any enemy forces that might be inside, said Welch, who joined the delegation in observing practice missions Monday. Vermont soldiers also are working on interacting with Afghan villagers and leaders.

"They have to be gentle and peacemakers, getting positive relationships with the community," Welch said.

The Brigade Combat Team has a total strength of 3,000 soldiers and will conduct joint missions with the Afghan national army, provide security and establish bases in eastern Afghanistan, according to a written account of training by Camp Atterbury spokesman Spc. John Crosby.

Among the drills are interactions where soldiers must make split-second decisions about who is an "innocent" and who is a hostile, and, toward the end of the training, missions using live

ammunition, Welch said. The exercises are videotaped, and soldiers -- who often spend more than 12 consecutive hours outdoors as they work through drills and scenarios -- later review the recordings and discuss what went well and what didn't.

Capt. Kate Irish, a Guard spokeswoman who traveled with the Vermont contingent, said the training is "going really well" as the troops approach an expected mid-March mobilization overseas.

"They seemed really excited. They seemed really excited to see all of us," Irish said from Camp Atterbury, where the Guard brass planned to spend Monday night before returning to Vermont later today. "They seemed very focused."

Welch -- who said in December that he disagreed with President Barack Obama's decision to order an additional 30,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan -- said the delegation delivered a message to the Vermont soldiers Monday: "Good luck, and we're with you."

"They're true patriots. You can't have a democracy unless you have citizen soldiers who are willing to serve," said Welch, adding that the soldiers sacrifice much to support their convictions. It's up to civilian political leadership, Welch said, "to give them a mission worthy of their idealism."